Energy & Community

Peter Seitel

This year, for the second consecutive Festival, the Department of Energy is sponsoring a presentation of an energy-related theme in American folklife. Festival planners are highlighting two kinds of energy production that lately have been much in the news—coal and oil. Consistent with the Festival's traditional concern for occupational folklife, this year's energy component presents lore, lifestyles, and music from communities and families of coal and oil workers. The Department of Energy and the Festival of American Folklife invite you to experience some community folkways of the people who extract these important energy resources from the earth.

Coal miners and their kin from West Virginia share with you their music and their tales about working in the mines and living in "mine patch" communities. Underground miners demonstrate some skills needed in their work and some kinds of equipment that they handle to extract bituminous coal from the mountains. They will help you try on miners' safety equipment and demonstrate the difference between "high coal" and "low coal." Men and women working in the mines form a close-knit group: they depend upon each other's skills, attention to safety, and moral support. The mine is potentially dangerous, and strong community ties help to preserve, maintain, and better the miner's life.

The "roughnecks" who come to the Festival from the Golden Triangle oil-producing region of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast are, in fact, relatively gentle people whose nickname is really an occupational classification. "Roughnecks" are people who work on the floor of an oil-drilling derrick. Historically, in the boom-and-bust

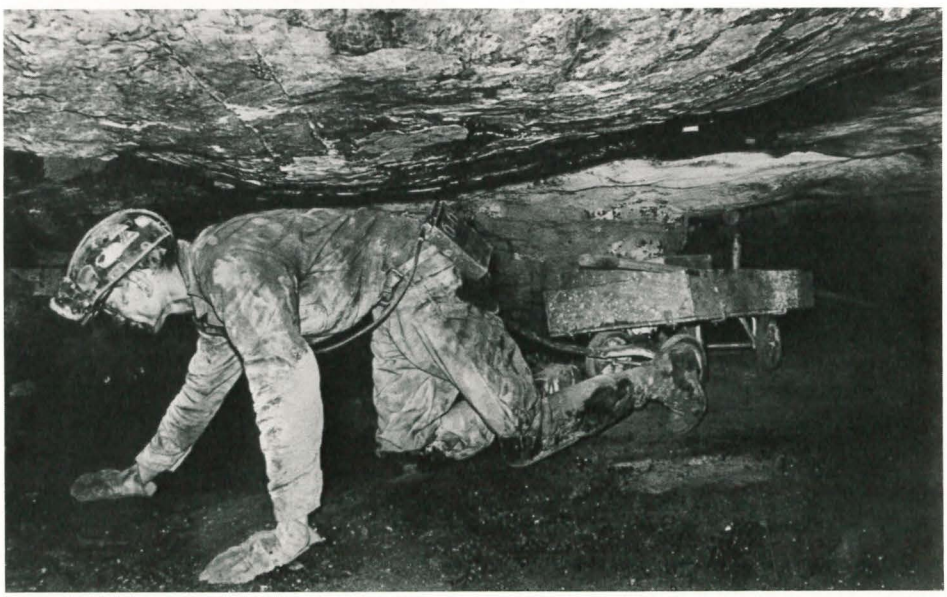


George Korson, pioneer industrial folklorist, records miners' music in New Kirk Tunnel Mine, Tamagua, Pa., 1946.
Photo from Korson Archive, King's College, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.



Miners pause to eat in the "dinner hole."
Photo courtesy United Mine Workers.

A miner carries around his blasting tools while working in low coal.
Photo courtesy United Mine Workers.



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days of oil discovery, when an exploratory well signaled its fruitfulness with a spewing geyser of oil, when towns of floorless tents and ramshackle buildings sprang up to house the rapid influx of workers, "roughneck" may have also signified a characteristic life-style. But today oil workers live as do their counterparts in other industries, in the communities that ring the Gulf shore. Oil workers will share with you their specialized knowledge, skills, work-related tales of today and of the boom years earlier in this century, and folk traditions from several ethnic groups whose members work in Golden Triangle oil.

The forces that shape coal miners' and oil drillers' occupational folklives are similar to those that shape the occupational folklives of other workers in outdoor extractive or construction industries such as lumber, hard-rock mining, and high steel. One of these forces is physical danger, which requires careful cooperation among work-crew members. The workers are, in a sense, dependent upon one another for their safety and continued productivity; this mutual interdependence is expressed in a variety of cultural forms.

A principal factor that makes these worksites dangerous is that they are nonpermanent. Unlike workers in a factory, processing plant or office, extractive workers practice their skills in a continually changing workplace. Oil drillers move from site to site exploring or augmenting existing wells. A miner's workplace moves deeper and deeper into the earth as coal is extracted. The temporary nature of the work sites makes permanent safety installation and structures impractical and uneconomical. Safety thus depends more upon procedures than on structures. This increases mutual reliance among members of the work crew; an oversight by any one can bring danger for all.

The use of large heavy equipment in very small spaces also increases danger and the need for cooperative action. Oil drilling requires coordinated movements among a crane operator, who hoists lengths of drilling pipe; the "monkeyman" who takes out and stores away the pipe on a raised platform; and the "roughneck" who either receives lengths of pipe that the craneman has lowered and attaches them to the drilling shaft, or removes lengths of pipe and rigs them so the craneman can lift them to the higher platform for storage. Uncoordinated or ill-informed movements mean injuries.



A derrick or "monkey" man works high above the drilling platform.
Photo by David Moody © 1978.

Roughnecks at work.
Photo by David Moody © 1978.



Nature introduces complications in work procedures. Rain brings mud to the oil-drilling worksite, a slippery situation to work with, but unavoidable. While they are virtually unaffected by direct rain or sunshine, underground coal miners must cope with geologic hazards such as gas, irregular rock formations and underground water.

The intensified force of community in the mine and on the oil drilling rig is expressed in many cultural forms. At the basis of all of them is a set of shared understandings that enable one to predict and depend on the actions of co-workers. The occupational community's shared understandings include not only norms of behavior (predictable actions) but also values. In mining and oil drilling as in other dangerous occupations, values weigh the relative balance between safety on the one side and production speed on the other.

Occupational cultural expression includes both verbal and "practical" joking, which, among other things, seems to be aimed at keeping fellow workers loose in their job roles, flexible and adaptable to unexpected possibilities. Narratives contain information about both the recurrent and the unusual situations that occur on the job. Songs, especially among coal miners, express shared feelings. And elements of personal style, like a coal miner's distinctive round "dinner pail" contribute to a strong statement of identity.

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